

Wendy Artin.

In the fall of 2017, we returned to Rome pretty much for the first time since 1994. As it happened, in 1994, as our stay in Rome was drawing to a close, Wendy arrived in the city. Even more footloose than we (we had jobs to return to), she had embarked on a summer visit of a few months in Rome, ending up spending twenty years. Our return in fall of 2017 coincided with her own return to the city after a two-year exile. Imagine our pleasure in walking down the hill and up the stairs and into her apartment and seeing, taped to the wall, a very large charcoal drawing of Bernini's sculpture of the Rio della Plata.

Freed from the monument, the river god comes to life. That sensation is effected by the expanded range of contrast afforded by charcoal on paper. He lifts one hand to protect himself against the sight of the sun or of god or who knows, as we cannot see his face. Hanging next to him, the Rio Ganges, part of the same series of drawings, by contrast, looked very much like the piece of carved stone that he is. Old, indebted to antiquity, inhabiting a differential temporality, like a glacier. In his eyes and expression is the sense of thinking in slow motion. The shallow dark gray matrix surrounding the bearded figure transforms him into a kind of carved stone relief on the wall, which of course is what he is, a charcoal-sculpture.

The striking contrast in style between the two drawings is a reflection of Wendy's expertise in drawing and painting stone sculpture. Indeed, the Rio Ganges appears in another large charcoal drawing, but you would not recognize him at first glance, because the figure is handled so differently. In this image, the figure comes off the page, the bottom of one foot and the toes of the other, close enough for us to touch. The figure is sharply lit from the back, and the river god turns toward the light. Like two other charcoal drawings of Bernini's rivers, this one does not allow us to look into the eyes. The effect of this, like the effect of the raised hands of the two other river gods, is to reanimate Bernini's stone figures, make them mysterious again, by putting into question the objects of their attention. The rivers, or the drawings, hold something back. We know these stone gods; they are acquaintances. We return to them from time to time in Piazza Navona. But there they seem a little dazed, for they are surrounded by chattering admirers, and the din of water dulls the mind. Eighteenth century critics came down hard on statues like these. In Winckelmann's memorable, snooty put-down, they are "like common people who have suddenly met with good fortune." The critics asked, Where is the noble simplicity and quiet grandeur? Why has the sculptor so openly depicted high drama? Where is the subtlety of allusion, the intellectual free space for reverie? Wendy's drawings, which give the figures an unfathomable interior life, are a quiet, damning response.

One irony in the images of the river gods is that they are water figures, surrounded by pool and fountain, but made out of dry charcoal, whereas Wendy's principal medium is watercolor. The watercolors are characterized above all by a delicate balance between the media of hard stone, live wood, purple fruit, white paper, and liquid pigment. Consider the range of resolutions in the watercolor entitled *Testa Bifronte*, from the washed-out halo to the razor-sharp folds of the veil to the startlingly black drilled hole in the ear. Those effects are fundamental to the appeal of Wendy's many pictures of ruins and pines. In those works, the white or cream background of the paper support becomes the most solid thing in the image, and the hard brick monument from 2,000 years ago, or the 100-year-old umbrella pine, is like a dream. Consider two watercolors, one of the solid temple of Saturn and the other of misty umbrella pines. The trunks of the trees are no match for the phalanx of cylinders, arraying against the viewer, standing proudly apart from each other, oblivious to their metal band-aids, in defiance of time. The trunks of the pines huddle together for protection, uncertain of exactly which direction to grow. But the mass of dark pigment into which the trunks disappear, like the pine grove it represents, is more solidly fixed in my mind than the temple of Saturn will ever be.

The watercolors lack archaeological or antiquarian exactitude, which characterizes the art and writing of some Romanophiles, for whom the city really is the only eternal thing in the world, for whom the past is more present than today. In as much as they are metaphors at all, the watercolors speak to a different experience, a different attitude toward the eternal city, at least for me. Obviously, this is an artist who sees the antiquities of Rome as passionately as any recorder of the city. But the unfocused, fleeting forms of the images, the range of subjects from the monumental to the marketplace, speak of a relationship with the city that is more tentative, transitory, easily lost, and living to a great extent in the moment and in memory.

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